

***People Who Dream***  
***Matthew 3:1-12***  
***Advent 2***  
***6 December 2020***  
***Sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae***

I will be the first to admit that John the Baptist is not the first person who comes to mind when you think of peace. He was a prophet, a wildman, a renegade and even by 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian times, John was a radical, his attire was a little too sketchy for a messenger of God. The last prophet to dress that way was probably Elijah, a good 800 or so odd years before John. He was hardly in keeping with the times, even for the little backwater villages of the Judean desert. But it wasn't just his clothes that seemed out of place and out of time, his message itself was a radical departure from the established patterns of the time. And no wonder, exiled to the desert, John had had plenty of time to critique the status quo, to yearn for peace and to listen for God. In a world where religious expression was limited largely to the temple and controlled exclusively by a group of elite chief priests, in a political climate that was under the authority of the occupying forces of Rome, John knew that peace was

needed and that God was going to do a new thing, and it was time to prepare the way.

And the people came. In fact they didn't just come, scripture tell us that they poured out of Jerusalem, Judean, and the Jordanian countryside to hear him and see him in action. And they didn't just look, and they didn't just listen. They had a dream. And feeling themselves that peace can't wait, brave and radical souls repented and rejoiced their way right into that river. And in the earliest days of his desert preaching, this was successful ministry. The people who came down to that river were people who got it; people who looked at the current system they were living in, looked at the religion they knew and loved, and wanted to revive it; people who wanted to make room for the Spirit of God to enter into their lives and their world. They wanted to bring religious expression and personal faith relationship back to the people, infuse it with new life and new voices. They caught John's passion and knew not only that God was going to be entering their life in a new way, but knew too that they wanted to be a part of it. They made the dream theirs.

As is so often the case, the more these people bought in to John's message the more word spread. Soon more and more people were flocking

to the desert to experience this new life in baptism that John promised. Soon, even, the leaders of the community – the movers and shakers, the influential and the rich – the Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up, because it was becoming the “in thing to do”. John’s deliciously counter culture message was rapidly deteriorating to the realm of pop culture.

That was the problem that John began addressing as more and more people came. His fit at the riverbank is hardly savvy, but he does get his point across, calling those who gathered a brood of vipers. He’s frustrated and his yearning for peace – real peace that comes from justice and faith lives out is reaching a fevered pitch. He wants his ministry to really mean something to the people, to not just be a show, he wants the message of God to transform them, to change them, he wants to see them commit to being a part of this realm of peace and justice that God is creating. So John tells them, not only do their motivations not cut it, but the public actions they are taking at the river are only mile 1 of the path to wholeness that he is pointing to. Real living transformation comes from someplace much deeper and requires a lot more work than a dunk in the river. But it is so worth it, because one is coming who is *more*, more radical, more loving, more inclusive, more transformative than anyone or anything this world

has ever known. And when this one comes, this word made flesh, this love of God in human form, when he comes he will introduce a whole new world; a whole new way of being. It isn't just enough to sit around and wait passively for it to happen. The children of God who have ears to hear and eyes to see have to get out there in the world and prepare the way for the one who is coming so that this love and grace can just walk straight through their doors. To keep dream that things can be different, and to make this dream their own, knowing that we have a role in this new life coming to be.

And that is challenging. Dreaming is challenging, opening our hearts and our lives to this love of God that is here with us now, in this place, in our lives, and breaking in everyday in the world around us, is challenging. To make this ministry and this worship mean something, is challenging. Especially in these days. It is about more than just preparing for the birth of the baby in the stable at Christmas, it is about making room for that baby, that man whom love and grace will transform into the Risen Christ. It is about committing ourselves to making room for that love in our lives not just now, but every day, in spite of the uncertainty and anxiety we are feeling ... maybe even because of it. And that will, be a challenging, but wonderful thing. Because when we do it, when we really commit

ourselves, as John says to making straight the path for this love to enter in, we are called to lay down our defenses and, just as we are, holding all of our anxieties and worries, our human frailties, and be moved to the core by a depth of love unimaginable. We are called to lay down our own sense of power and control as the Spirit enters our lives stretching and challenging us with new ideas, new opportunities, and new ways of living in relationship. We are called see that each of us is called to be co-creators not just in our own lives, in our own small corner of the world, but co-creators of a new creation; a creation where the weak, poor, and oppressed are given voices and freedoms, where we are humbled and awed by limitless grace and love.

And I think you want to be a part of it. I think you too yearn for the peace that comes from deeper relationship with God. That is why you are here. You are here because you know you want and need to be part of something more. And this morning John is, in his uniquely aggressive and strange way, pointing to the path that will bring you to that *more* that you are looking for. And if you are willing to begin walking on that path it will invite you to look at the world in ways that you never imagined. It will stretch you and challenge you and change your mind, even when you

thought your mind was unchangeable. It will bring you peace at a time when peace feels very elusive. It will assure you that the hope you cling to is not in vain. But, as with most things, the path won't be simple and the path won't be easy. But it is so worth it.

Even John, the one who whole heartedly pushes us to jump on this path, will find out for himself what a challenge it can be. Even *he* was not totally prepared for where commitment to the path of Jesus would take him. John whose message was a hard hitting call to repentance, was called by Jesus to preach a path of welcome and forgiveness, challenged to view God and God's people in a new and different light. Fredrick Buechner in his whimsical book "Peculiar Treasures, a Biblical Whos Who" points out that it would be no surprise at all if John himself had second thoughts about this whole Jesus character when he finally met him. Afterall Buechner says, "Where John preached grim justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye. Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew the whole bankroll on liquor and

partying like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn't too late. Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness with the church crowd, Jesus ate whatever he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find. Where John crossed to the other side of the street if he saw any sinners heading his way, Jesus seems to have preferred their company. Where John baptized, Jesus healed."

You just never know. The thing is, as unpredictable as a life of faith may be, there is one guarantee we have, around every corner, whatever else may be waiting, healing love and grace – the peace we need - is breaking in. So whether you are new to the church, new to faith, or as old as Moses, in this Advent season, this new year in the church, you are invited to join us in making the paths straight. Because Christ is coming, and peace, the true deep peace that comes from ministry in action and faith lived out, can't wait. Now is the time to prepare the way. Amen